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**THE NOMINATION OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN TO THE  
PRESIDENCY, AN UNSOLVED PSYCHO-  
LOGICAL PROBLEM.**

By JANE MARTIN JOHNS, Decatur, Illinois.

Renewed interest in the history of Illinois and its great men, stimulated by the centennial, has given many events a hitherto unrecognized place in history. A psychological problem of intense interest to the historian, which has never received the attention its importance demands, is the startling and unprecedented nomination of Abraham Lincoln for President of the United States by the State Republican Convention of May 6, 1860.

An obscure politician of practically no experience in public affairs, Lincoln had been brought into national prominence by his debates with Stephen A. Douglas and was a prominent candidate for the Vice Presidency, with William A. Seward heading the ticket.

These debates had made it impossible for Mr. Lincoln to "sink out of view." The Republicans of Illinois were proud of his record and were determined "to do him honor." Early in 1860 he was mentioned for the Presidency but was hardly considered a candidate. But for Vice President on a ticket headed by William H. Seward, he was prominent before the people. It was almost universally believed that the State Convention of Illinois would present his name for that office to the National Convention in Chicago.

The State Convention was booked for Decatur May 6, 1860, and the question of what to do with it was a puzzling one. There was neither hall nor hotel room to accommodate the accredited delegates, much less the large crowd of prominent men who were expected guests. Committees were appointed to solve the problem.

To the people of Decatur at that day nothing was impossible, and very soon arrangements were completed to ade-

quately accommodate the crowd. The entertainment of all delegates was provided for by the hospitality of private citizens, leaving the hotels for the press and other visitors, a building to accommodate the convention had to be provided, It is described by the Decatur Herald, as follows:

"D. C. Shockley was a contractor and builder and the Republicans of Decatur entrusted to him the erection of a structure for the convention. At that time there was a vacant lot on each side of State Street. These lots, with State street, were selected as the best site for the purpose. There were few lumber yards in Decatur then and lumber was hard to rent for such purposes. It cost too much to buy it. Enough lumber was secured, however, to build about sixteen or eighteen feet of the west end against the Washburn building. The roof was flat, sloping south with the surface of the ground. Richard J. Oglesby in some way secured a large tent fly belonging to some circus company. This was attached to the wooden part and stretched flat across to near the east building, supported by posts and stringers, and was roped down at the ends and sides.

"This structure was called "The Wigwam". It was something over 100 feet east and west, fronting on Park Street, and about seventy feet wide. The stand was on the south side and the roof was so low that the heads of men as tall as Lincoln, when on the platform, almost touched the canvas roof. The seats were constructed of plank, staked on edge with boards laid over them."

It was in this wigwam that Richard J. Oglesby conceived and executed the *coup d'etat* which was the crowning glory of his life, and which in its inspired fruition gave to the world the nomination of Abraham Lincoln for President of the United States and made of honest labor a stepping stone to high position.

The world owes a tribute to the memory of Oglesby, not as General or Senator or three times Governor, but as the forerunner of Lincoln, the John the Baptist of a new dispensation.

This convention had been called to nominate a candidate for Governor and to select a presidential ticket which should receive the support of the Illinois delegation to the National Republican Convention, which was to convene in Chicago in June.

It was a notable assemblage of great men. Lincoln was there. So was Palmer, Oglesby, Medill, Judd, Lovejoy, Wentworth, ready for the fray.

A strong delegation from New York were supporting Seward, and a similar one from Ohio were boosting Chase, all of whom were willing to place the name of Abraham Lincoln second on the ticket. A large majority of the delegates to the convention had been instructed by their constituents to vote for Seward and Lincoln.

To Oglesby of Decatur must be conceded the honor of *creating* the candidacy of Abraham Lincoln for President of the United States. He knew and honored and loved Mr. Lincoln, and believed from the bottom of his great heart that none of the other candidates were so eminently fitted for that high position as Abraham Lincoln. He had conceived the idea of presenting Lincoln as the representative candidate of free labor, the exponent of the possibilities for a poor man in a free State. Recalling the successful Log Cabin and Hard Cider campaign of 1840, he determined to find some one thing in Mr. Lincoln's unsuccessful career as a worker that could be made the emblem of that idea and a catchword which would make enthusiastic the working people. One day he met John Hanks, whom he knew had worked with Lincoln on a farm years and years before, and asked him "what kind of work 'Abe' used to be good at."

"Well, not much of any kind but dreaming," was Hanks' reply, "but he did help me split a lot of rails when we made the clearing twelve miles west of here."

The rest of the story I will give as it was related to J. McCan Davis, clerk of the Supreme Court of Illinois, by Mr. Oglesby himself:

"John," said I, "did you split rails down there with Old Abe?"

"Yes; every day," he replied.

"Do you suppose you could find any of them now?"

"Yes," he said. "The last time I was down there, ten years ago, there were plenty of them left."

"What are you going to do tomorrow?"

"Nothing."

"Then," said I, "come around and get in my buggy and we will drive down there."

So the next day we drove out to the old clearing. We turned in by the timber and John said:

"Dick, if I don't find any black-walnut rails, nor any honey-locust rails, I won't claim it's the fence Abe and I built."

Presently John said: "There's the fence!"

"But look at those great trees," said I.

"Certainly," he answered. "They have all grown up since."

John got out, I stayed in the buggy. John kneeled down and commenced chipping the rails of the old fence with a penknife. Soon he came back with black-walnut shavings and honey-locust shavings.

"There they are," said he, triumphantly holding out the shavings. "They are the identical rails we made."

Then I got out and made an examination of the fence. There were many black-walnut and honey-locust rails.

"John," said I, "where did you cut these rails?"

"I can take you to the stumps," he answered.

"We will go down there," said I.

We drove about a hundred yards.

"Now," said he, "look! There's a black-walnut stump; there's another—another—another. Here's where we cut the trees down and split the rails. Then we got a horse and wagon, hauled them in, and built the fence and the cabin."

We took two of the rails and tied them under the hind axle-tree of my new buggy, and started for town. People would occasionally pass and think something had broken. We let them think so, for we didn't wish to tell anybody just what we were doing. We kept right on until we got to my barn. There we hid the rails until the day of the convention.

Before the convention met, I talked with several Republicans about my plan, and we fixed it up that old John Hanks should take the rails into the convention. We made a banner, attached to a board cross the top of the rails, with the inscription:

"Abraham Lincoln, The Railsplitter Candidate, for President in 1860. Two rails from a lot of 3,000 made in 1830 by John Hanks and Abe Lincoln."

After the convention got under way, I arose and announced that an old Democrat desired to make a contribution to the convention. The proceedings stopped, and all was expectancy and excitement. Then I walked old John with the banner on the rails.

The enthusiasm with which this rail-framed banner was received by the convention is unrivaled in history, unless we except the reception of Mr. Lincoln's nomination at Chicago a few weeks later. The roof was literally cheered off the building, hats and canes and books and papers were tossed aloft, as men jumped and screamed and howled, until part of the awning over the platform fell on their heads. When the enthusiasm finally subsided the Wigwam was almost a wreck.

Oglesby's inspired faith in Lincoln was not shared, even by the few friends to whom he had committed the secret of the rail borne banner. They said: "Go ahead. You can't do any harm, even if you do no good. But don't pin your faith in Lincoln to that banner."

Six delegates from Stephenson County, who were our guests, were at breakfast, firmly for Seward and Lincoln, but at dinner they were for "Lincoln—Lincoln and anybody," but Lincoln first.

The whole transaction was a surprise to Mr. Lincoln. Mr. Lowber Burrows, who was present, thus described the scene:

"Yes, I was present when Johnny Hanks carried that banner into the convention, and the whole crowd went wild. The members were simply frantic with surprise and delight. Lincoln was wildly called for. You know, he could not be found when they wanted him. A committee hunted around and finally found him in the back room of his friend, Jim Peake's jewelry store. Lincoln had wandered into the store, seeking for a few minutes rest and quiet, and seeing the couch, threw himself on it and soon fell asleep.

"He was roused and rushed to the platform of the convention through a back entrance. He knew nothing of the plot and, when confronted with the banner, stood for a few minutes simply dazed with astonishment. When told that these were rails that he had split, he said: 'Gentlemen, John and I did split some rails down there, and if these are not the identical rails, we certainly made some quite as good.'"

From that time on the rails were ever present in the campaign. The Seward boom was dead. Dick Oglesby and old John Hanks and two fence rails had killed it.

John M. Palmer was soon on his feet with a resolution declaring that "Abraham Lincoln is the first choice of the Republican party of Illinois for the presidency," and instructing "the delegates to the Chicago Convention to use all honorable means to secure the nomination and to cast the vote of the State as a unit for him."

Thomas J. Turner of Freeport, who had served in Congress with Lincoln in 1847-8, was there as a champion of Seward, and he bitterly attacked the resolution. Palmer replied in a speech of tremendous force and the resolution was adopted amid great applause.

From time immemorial, all over the world, class distinction had placed the working man at the bottom of the ladder, until Oglesby with inspired genius, linked Lincoln and labor together in a position of highest honor. Here was a new Magna Charta. The stigma of servitude had been removed from toil and the work of a man's hands made a title of honorable distinction. The dignity of labor was vindicated.

The new doctrine at once became the battle cry of the Republican party, with Abraham Lincoln's life history as its exponent.

Mr. Oglesby's idea was adopted by the North with enthusiasm, but the slaveholding aristocracy of the South scornfully repudiated the Railsplitter. "The man who would do the work that a 'nigger' could do as well" was not fit for a white man's society, much less for his vote. Mr. Lincoln's antecedents and personality were made to supersede political questions and the issue was seemingly, "Poor white trash or a gentleman." Through ridicule and caricature the very name of Lincoln was made an offense to decency. To mention him was like casting a firebrand into a powder magazine. In the North, depicting him as a laborer soon degenerated into caricaturing him as a boor until it became the accepted idea that he was an uncouth, untidy, clownish nondescript, and visitors to Springfield during the presidential campaign were astonished at finding him a gentleman. So lasting was the effect of these representations that people of today "who remember seeing Lincoln" forget the man as he was and remember him only as he was caricatured. That this false characterization of Mr. Lincoln has been given permanency by the Barnhard statue is greatly to be deplored.

When I first knew Mr. Lincoln he was a man of common mold, genial, kindly, ambitious, a violent partisan, a shrewd lawyer, a diplomatic politician. Judge David Davis, Leonard Swett, Judge Bross and other prominent Whigs outranked him in the public eye, but as a pro-slavery man, not tainted with abolitionism, he was accepted as a compromise candidate for the United States Senate. But his divine mission dates from that memorable hour on February 8, 1855, when he first sacrificed personal ambition and party fealty at the call of Right and Justice. From that hour until the hand of

an assassin "gave him to the ages," Abraham Lincoln continuously grew in charity, knowledge, wisdom, strength and power, until the world had idolized him and placed him on the pinnacle of Fame, as the Apotheosis of Liberty and Democracy.